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BODY CONSCIOUSNESS IN MODERN URBAN SURROUNDINGS: FREERUNNING AND PARKOUR

1. BREAKING THE LINE

One year ago I came across the online *parkour* documentary entitled “Breaking the Line”¹. The edit directed by British *traceur* Dan Edwardes did not stand out as something exceptional among the whole line of similar productions. Both the level of tricks and technical advancement of the footage fit perfectly into the “medium” category on the scale of industry standards². However, what caught my attention was the narration carried by the author, especially one direct sentence that appealed to me as worth remembering: “We are *Cro-Magnon* bodies living and operating in a digital world”.

For me as a philosopher interested in somaesthetics, this short statement brought to life all consequences of the famous body – mind problem and put them in a modern urban context³. The fact that functions of our bodies and also their motor skills seem to be adequate to those developed by our ancestors living 30,000 years ago is a striking one. Indeed skeletons of *Homo sapiens fossilis* found in Cro-Magnon in France were thoroughly investigated many years ago and since that time the so-called “*Cro-Magnon* Man” is believed to be identical to modern people in an anatomical sense. However, it is also known that those *Cro-Magnon* people used their bodies in different modes and led their lives according to other patterns than us. It is believed that humans living in this period developed coordinated group hunting techniques, demanding a level of fitness

¹ Edwardes Dan, *Breaking the Line*, a British parkour documentary.

² *Traceur* is a term that comes from French and is used to define a person who practises *parkour*.

³ Somaesthetics is a sub-discipline of modern aesthetics. It was established by American pragmatist philosopher Richard Shusterman at the end of the 20th century as a corpus of meliorative studies concerning the matter of body.

that is almost unreachable for present generations of people. The finest example of that is the fact that *Cro-Magnon* Man could probably constantly run without longer intervals, even for a few days and nights, following escaping groups of prey. More importantly, such ability was rather a standard than an exception as whole populations used to migrate tracing and hunting large groups of animals.

This sort of knowledge brings us awareness of basic incoherence on the level of the human body. Even a brief comparison of our own and our ancestors' lifestyles proves that *Homo Sapiens's* body design seems to no longer correspond with requirements of its surroundings. The description given by Edwardes in his documentary makes us aware how serious the problem is:

We no longer live according to the original function of our body [(...)] your body is designed to be active, 90% of your waking life is expected to be running around, walking, climbing, hunting, cooking, socialising with your social group.

Contrary to that, what our bodies usually do is mainly sitting while our brains are collecting, segregating and exchanging information. 90% of our waking life is sitting in a chair at work, on a bus or in a car, or just on couches in our homes. In addition to this, we are forced to sit or stand while being "online" as common Internet interfaces demand deep visual engagement, which makes moving in city surroundings a hazardous activity. The obvious question that pops up in this respect is if there is any solution to this dysfunctional situation.

I will not even try to give a holistic answer as the matter is really complex. What I am going to do is to indicate specific activities undertaken in modern city surroundings and also ask some questions about their meaning and context. Those already mentioned activities are called *Le Parkour* and Freerunning and the thesis I am going to prove is that both of them are not only a fashion or a hobby but rather regular somaesthetic disciplines of a performative nature that can be understood and practised as ways of redefining an aesthetic experience in modern urban surroundings, thus to resolve the problem signalled at the beginning of this essay.

2. ADAPT

Let's take a "walk" – one of the most common human activities – as a starting point for our considerations. Walking, as a way of moving, appears to us as a multidimensional phenomenon. On a basic physical level, "walking" concerns the movement of bodies in space. However, it is worth remembering that we can think about walking also in a correlation with movement of ideas. Moving in both mentioned dimensions has been associated for ages with

the thought about the close relationship of theory and practice which has accompanied man from the beginning of philosophy. It was Plato who defined different types of moves in his *Timaios* dialogue (Platon 1986: 89). The Greek philosopher appreciated such type of movement that is spontaneous, comes from the inside and is caused by the subject itself. Gymnastics was given by Plato as the best example of such movement, as according to him, it was the best way of purifying the body and restoring it to the state of normality. Plato, however, mentioned also two other types of movement, the first of which was of a passive nature and was connected with such experiences as being carried by a ship or different types of vehicles, which produced a “rhythmic rocking” kind of sensation. The latter type of movement was defined as something unnatural and was connected with the idea of a “pharmakon”, something that is artificial, comes from the outside of the body and affects the natural flow of things. Thanks to French postmodern philosopher Jacques Derrida and his famous essay concerning Plato’s “pharmakon”, writing appears as the best described example of such a type of movement (Derrida 1981). Writing, as a way of movement, is directly connected with forgetting and recalling processes and it is worth remembering that Plato often used the opposition of writing and speech in his dialogues as examples of two different philosophical approaches. To sum up, what is important in the matter of considerations concerning walking is that movement can be understood as something coming from inside and outside of the body, something that happens both on physical and intellectual levels as we can spontaneously move in space and also project our movements by intellectual acts.

EXAMPLE: HUMAN LOOP

It seems that a key to understanding the above-mentioned relationship of theory and practice in the context of movement is the idea of adaptation. Now, we are going to devote special attention to understanding the phenomenon of adaptation of the body to perform specific types of movement. We are going to follow a correspondence between sequences of physical movements with movement of ideas.

It is worth taking a look at a short commercial documentary indicating relations in the said matter. The clip entitled “Loop the Loop” has been already seen by more than 10,000,000 people on YouTube. It shows stuntman Damien Walters’s efforts of performing a “loop”. The “loop” is a physical construction that has its place in architecture but also an acrobatic figure performed by pilots, skaters and bmx riders, however, it has not been performed by a runner yet.

The short film documents how the body can perform in real time. Walters's challenge is to run through a type of a structure with which our bodies rather do not have an opportunity to deal with while performing our common daily movements routine. During a short, few minute long edit, we observe parallel processes of using human motor skills and intellectual potential. There has not been invented any way of running through the loop. Walters has to find it out by doing it. We can be almost sure that no-one before has ever tried to run through a structure of this type. Apart from a lack of any sources documenting such an event, it is important to note that appearance of the structure called the "loop" in a natural environment is so limited that it is rather impossible it could ever provoke any attempts of running through it. However, for Walters, the idea of the loop was so inspiring that finally it forced him to make several attempts at running through its physical model. Why was such a unique structure so important for the stuntman? The answer is simple, although the structure is unique in the scale of natural environment, it is a common element of our modern architecture. It was a human being who invented the loop! If we look around carefully, we will probably discover plenty of them in our local surroundings.

Now, think about Walters's attempt as an example of a specific process when a human being feels forced to confront consequences of his or her own ideas. Ideas embodied in architecture demand a fulfilment on the physical level of the human body. Such phenomenon is nothing new and seems to be specific to many somaesthetic disciplines of a performative nature which have developed in urban surroundings. On a street slang level, it is illustrated by special expressions. For example, skaters, jibbers and *traceurs* say that a specific location can be "explained". The location is "explained" when a special, good trick or even a whole bag of tricks have been successfully performed on it. This type of behaviour seems to be an extension of human actions undertaken in a natural environment context. We could say that those urban actions are nothing more than variations of the idea of exploration known from Reinhold Messner's famous saying. Messner, a legendary climber, stated that "people explore mountains because mountains exist". Applying this kind of logic to a city structure, we should say: "people explore cities, because cities exist".

3. A SHORT STORY OF CITY WALKING

As we have already experienced, many of us are not using city spaces according to their programmed functions. The need for such spontaneous use of space was recognised and described by the 20th and 21st century architects, researchers and artists.

One of those people, Constant August Nieuwenhuys, a Danish artist and architect, became famous thanks to his idea of “New Babylon”, a model city of the future, focused on deregulation of space and creation of alternative life experiences. Nieuwenhuys, understood well consequences of a great change concerning modern people’s lifestyles. Since the 1950s, he could observe young generations of people creating counter-culture movements that found out their manifestations in beatnik, hippies or punk cultures, to name a few. It is worth noting that lifestyles of people creating those movements simply did not fit into city frames, determining and separating spaces and functions, according to modern architects’ dogma of “one space – one function”. Nieuwenhuys was also aware that, in spite of widespread Daniel Bell’s views, describing a radical split between culture and society, many people living in the reality of capitalistic economy will try to follow vanguard life patterns as much as they can, which – taking into consideration relatively high amount of free time available – will lead them to creating a new type of city experiences.

What is striking, Nieuwenhuys’s point of view was similar to the modern idea of “transhuman city” promoted by German aesthetician Wolfgang Welsch. Both Nieuwenhuys and Welsch seem to understand well that both modern city planning and traditional lifestyle patterns are not sufficient for modern people. Welsch wrote an interesting essay concerning that matter entitled “Spaces for Humans?”, where he criticises the so-called “humanisation” of city spaces. According to Welsch, city spaces have been humanised, which basically means that they were and still are being designed on the basis of popular convictions about the “human nature” and what human beings should or should not like or do. The aesthetician finds out that this design paradigm is deeply rooted in the Enlightenment period and reveals how deeply urban design was affected by such thinkers as Diderot or Kant, measuring the outside world by the “human” scale. Welsch claims that, in spite of this ideology, there is a strong need for “non-human” (in opposition to the already given meaning of “human”), undetermined spaces. That echoes greatly with Nieuwenhuys’s point of view on the matter:

It is obvious that a person free to use his time for the whole of his life, free to go where he wants, when he wants, cannot make the greatest use of his freedom in a world ruled by the clock and the imperative of a fixed abode. As a way of life Homo Ludens will demand, firstly, that he responds to his need for playing, for adventure, for mobility, as well as all the conditions that facilitate the free creation of his own life. Until then, the principal activity of man had been the exploration of his natural surroundings. Homo Ludens himself will seek to transform, to recreate, those surroundings, that world, according to his new needs. The exploration and creation of the environment will then happen to coincide because, in creating

his domain to explore, Homo Ludens will apply himself to exploring his own creation. Thus we will be present at an uninterrupted process of creation and recreation, sustained by a generalized creativity that is manifested in all domains of activity (Nieuwenhuys 1974).

The idea of exploration of the city sounds revolutionary, even in present times. However, who really believes that a street is only a mode of communication from point A to point B? Did our ancestors believe it?

Let us say that for the ancients walking appeared as something more than an activity or a process of a mechanical nature. A brief lecture of Plato and Aristotle proves that walking was also an important source of an aesthetic experience. In Plato's *Phaedrus Dialogue*, a discussion also concerns modes of walking. There is a division made between two ways of *peripatos* – carrying out discussions during walking. It can be performed as:

Kata tas hodos – on roads in a forest,
Hen tois dromois – in streets of a city.

As we remember, Phaedrus is an advocate of the first mode, Socrates the latter. This behaviour finds its extension in the school of Aristotle as a method called *peripathetic*. Thus, it seems obvious that for ancient Greeks walking was an aesthetic phenomenon of a psycho – physical nature.

However, not only Europeans used to perform such a mode of walking. The Chinese and Japanese used to build their meditation gardens in cities. Contrary to our modern commonly shared image of such gardens, those were not sitting meditation gardens like *Zen* stone gardens but labyrinth type gardens created for walking. It is important to mention in this context that both the Chinese and Japanese distinguish a special type of a passive sense (Chinese: *hsin*, Japanese: *kokkoro*) which lets the human being be involved in an interaction with the environment in a non-dominant way. It is often described as connected with a sense of balance. What is important, Zen history researcher Allan Watts writes about it in a context of walking. It seems that for ancient Asian cultures walking was also a source of aesthetic pleasure.

Knowing both the Western and Eastern ancient context of walking, it appears really intriguing why from a certain point of Western history, city designers started to treat people not as living, perceiving walkers but rather as moving machines.

4. A WALK IN DEPRIVATION

A significant change concerning city planning but also walking and generally moving took place in Europe in the period of Enlightenment and during the development of the idea of geometrical city. Something really strange happened as the change was initially understood as an example of making spaces more accessible, clear, friendly and thus more “human”. However, its result was a massive production of oppressive, dominant and unfriendly, “dehumanised” city spaces in Europe.

There is a well-known anecdote concerning philosopher Immanuel Kant’s habit of walking. According to it, Kant used to have a very precise daily timetable. He used to start his day by a walk to a river bank. It is said that people used to adjust their watches according to Kant’s strolls. What does it tell us about walking? The Enlightenment and further the Modernity appear as the time when, on the one hand, physical activity was understood as a right means to preserve health but, on the other hand, human bodies were subjected to an oppression of a social and architectural nature. It is not an exaggeration to say that since the Enlightenment period human bodies in Europe have been programmed, both from inside and from outside.

The architectural dimension is very important here. Georges Haussmann’s famous renovation of the centre of Paris is a good example. It seems obvious that this huge public programme had two parallel objectives, one was to unblock the space in the physical sense but the idea of controlling, managing people in space appears equally important. On the one hand, the new type of space was given to citizens, on the other, the fact of its creation gave a great opportunity for authorities to catalogue and count those city dwellers bodies. The results of such a geometric approach in architecture are mixed. Obviously, the method facilitated movement in the city space but at the same time it prompted people to move in the city space in a mindless way. It is important to note that bodies enclosed in such a new geometrical system were not used to it. They were forced to learn it rapidly by means of training. The second thing important to note in this regard is that, as a result of geometrisation, a well-known criterion of somatic partnership disappeared and was replaced by more abstract ideas. In simple words, citizenship was no longer based on psycho – physical participation in a local community and started to be determined by terms of affiliation to different abstract categories, such as labour institutions and administration units. This forced people to walk in sensory deprivation. This is a walk of Walter Benjamin’s “flaneur”, an observer, who belongs to the city more in a formal way but less in a somatic mode. This was a starting point for an experience of the city from a distant mode. Paraphrasing Wolfgang Welsch’s metaphor, in geometrical city spaces humans became “less connected” (Welsch 2014).

5. PERFORMING WALKING

It is significant that during and after the above-mentioned “walk in deprivation” period, people developed also a critical reflection concerning movement and walking. It is characteristic that at first it was rather a reverse type of reflection, which was directly inspired by the “back to the nature” concept. It seems that the simple idea of negation of the cultural context appeared as a very tempting solution in the reality of geometric city spaces. However, it was not only just about leaving or destroying city structures. One of the famous sayings of French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau is especially striking in this respect:

I can only meditate when I’m walking. When I stop, my mind ceases to think; my mind only works with my legs (Rousseau 1903).

This is by far the most evident, although relatively hidden, example of recreation of kinaesthetic awareness on the philosophical grounds of the 19th century. It is worth mentioning that the reflection concerning the human body was rather not developed as a part of philosophy but it was more of a physical education matter in those times. What is interesting, the 19th century idea of physical education was deeply rooted in the so called “natural movements”, as their creators referred directly to wild tribes’ way of movement, military training and sailors’ practices. It is important to note that all those activities were believed to be performed in the so called “natural environment”, yet those motor systems, derived straight from nature, were later adapted to the city environment, as they were taught in police schools, learnt mostly by cadets and firemen. Thus, systems of movement developed in forests and on decks of boats and ships were adapted to the street reality. The role of the two teachers is extremely important in the said matter.

Francisco Amoros was a 19th century Spanish officer living in France, where he introduced his unique concept of gymnastics. Amoros created the centre called “Gymnase Normal, Militaire et Civil” in Paris, the first place to train gymnastics in France and also published the book entitled “Manuel d’Education Physique, Gymnastique et Morale” devoted to physical education matters.

Georges Hebert (1875–1957) was a French Marine officer and traveller who had an opportunity to observe and participate in an ancient way of life of the so called “indigenous tribes”. According to common beliefs, his own gymnastic method was directly inspired by his observations. The so-called “Hebert Method” is a training system that excludes any competition. In simple words, it is a way of individual physical education which is based on

instant movement: walking, running, jumping, throwing, swimming, self-defence, wherein each of these activities is performed in accordance with a personal rhythm of an apprentice. The method is practised by covering special routes (“les parcours”) filled with special obstacles which have to be overcome with no stops, walking or running. The method developed by Hebert has become a foundation of modern *parkour* and freerunning movements.

6. SOMATIC CITY

However, the Hebert method appears as extremely interesting in the context of reconstitution of an aesthetic experience taking place in the city environment. It is important to note that there is no short-cut from the system created and developed by Hebert to modern performative disciplines of a somatic nature. Thus, it is not that easy to just point at Hebert as a person who invented *parkour*. Such a short-cut is impossible because of the fact of instant city form changes. It is worth remembering that our ideas concerning it are still evolving and also new strategies of managing city space are being developed.

Whereas, centralised and geometrical, modernistic cities of the 19th century were producing space in which citizens’ bodies were more subjects of management, regulations and disciplines than modes of individuality, today’s city form strategies seem to create the surroundings that are a platform of spontaneous somatic expression rather than a rigid frame.

This obvious difference between modernistic and contemporary city forms finds its manifestation in two different modes of city immersion.

- Immersion in the modernistic city space formation was understood as implementation, learning discipline, programming the body.
- Immersion in the contemporary city space formation means a more intuitive use of the body, learning to cooperate, making instant deals with the city frame, being in a constant state of movement, being ready for a change.

This common turn of a somatic nature produces new forms of walking and transportation of our bodies such as: *parkour*, freerunning, nordic walking, skateboarding, longboarding, inline skating, cycling. The counter influence of new somatic activities and city space managing strategies seems to produce a new city formation that is called a somatic city. Ranel Bowditch in the essay entitled “The Somatic City: Rehearsing the Utopia at Burning Man Festival” makes a distinction between a voyeur and a walker, quoting De Certeau:

De Certeau distinguishes between the “voyeur” and the “walker,” each having its own spatial vantage point. The voyeur is the Man, elevated high above the city, capable of witnessing the urban desert below as an omniscient god. De Certeau’s walker/wanderer embodies the thick and thin of an urban landscape without being able to read it. Networks of bodies moving through space compose a complex story in which each participant plays a single role in the epic narrative. The city becomes a readable text only when one experiences it on the ground, with footsteps as well as a tactile and kinesthetic awareness (Bowditch 2010).

As for the “tactile and kinesthesia awareness,” we cannot agree more, however, the city space context sketched by De Certeau and later by Bowditch seems still so static. While both researchers talk about kinaesthetic awareness, which is a dynamic, flowing expression, they still tend to use static categories as an “urban landscape” for the context of such awareness. This static context appears as distant from the idea of “kinopolis” understood as a dynamic, interactive, ever-changing structure. Famous Japanese architect Fumihiko Maki with his metaphor of a Cloud seems to be more adequate in describing this contemporary city form which finds its manifestation in activities such as *parkour* and freerunning. This gives us more adequate understanding of those activities and enables us to perceive them as disciplines designed to hold a state of a dynamic equilibrium with the ever-changing city frame.

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